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- [Hydropower production doubles in Asia](#)
- [Stone Buddha carving found in Xaysomboun field](#)
- [UN chief calls for empowerment of women as “agents of change”](#)
- [XiengKhuang residents get on-the-spot access to legal information](#)
- [Hydropower experts mull industry's future](#)
- [Govt vows to improve healthcare services for women](#)
- [Road upgrade on the cards as northern travellers suffer](#)
- [Ministry embarks on nutrition programme](#)
- [EU trade experts advise on AEC development](#)
- [Women promoted to higher positions in govt](#)
- [Ancient bronze Buddha images found in Khammuan](#)
- [Govt commits to expanding family planning access](#)
- [Lao heritage sites awarded Mekong tourism prize](#)

Hydropower production doubles in Asia

(By Times Reporters)

Asia's hydropower capacity and production has more than doubled over the last 10 years and could increase by a further 70 percent over the next 10 years. The continent's installed hydropower capacity is now 538 GW or 49 percent of the world total, according to a report from the Sixth International Conference and Exhibition on Water Resources and Hydropower Development in Asia, held in Vientiane from March 1-3. Annual production in Asia is about 1,800 TWh, or 46 percent of the world total, Aqua-Media International reported. In addition, about 62 percent of global hydro capacity under construction is in Asia, amounting to just under 100GW. Asia is the most active region of the world for the development of water infrastructure and most of the world's highest dams of all types are in Asia. Laos is a part of this growth and is focusing on the development of hydroelectric power facilities as an appropriate method of achieving sustainable social and economic development through its electrification programme, as well as boosting revenue. Hydropower potential in Laos is about 26,000MW. The target at present is for 10,000MW to be generated by 2020 and 20,000MW by 2030. To ensure that hydro projects are safe and sustainable, and that environmental impacts are reduced, co-operation and technical assistance from a large number of private and government

organisations is required. The conference that has just ended in Laos is important because it enabled participants to share their experiences in water resource and hydropower development in Asia. The event was considered beneficial to all those involved in the hydro, dams and water resources industries, including engineers, consultants, academics and government organisations. The first conference was organised in Bangkok, Thailand in 2006, while the second was held in Danang, Vietnam in 2008, the third in Sarawak, Malaysia in 2010, the fourth in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the fifth in Colombo, Sri Lanka. This week's conference presented balanced information about the role of hydropower in world energy supply and socio-economic development, as well as the multiple roles of dams. The annual meetings also aim to keep professionals informed about technical, economic, financial, environment and social aspects of development through various publications, and to promote best practice. It was noted that Asia is still facing challenges and climate issues. In 2014, more than half the world's natural disasters occurred in Asia, where river basin floods caused economic losses of US\$16 billion. Water stress, which is intensifying in large areas of Asia including China, the Indian sub-continent and Central Asia, underlines the need for more storage of water.

(Vientiane Times 05 March 2016)

Stone Buddha carving found in Xaysomboun field

(By Times Reporters)

A Buddha image carved from stone, and six pieces of marble, estimated to be 900-1,200 years old and possibly dating back to the Khmer Empire, were unearthed on February 29 by the driver of an excavator in Naluang village, Longxan district, Xaysomboun province. Mr Lae, 35, was digging up soil in a field for use in an irrigation channel when the excavator struck a hard object. He stopped the machine and together with the owner of the land pulled out a sizeable stone carving.



Local residents clean the stone Buddha image before it is taken to the village temple.

Much to their surprise it turned out to be a Buddha image many centuries old.

“I stopped digging as soon as I heard the excavator strike something. I and the owner of the land walked straight to the place where the object lay and we were surprised to find the Buddha image and other artefacts nearby,” he said. The stone Buddha image and other large pieces of stone were buried about 2 metres underground. The stone carving measured 15cm by 30cm while other items ranged in size from 30cm to 2 metres. Recognising the significance of their discovery, Mr Lae contacted local authorities and officials to see if they could identify the origin of the Buddha image and the pieces of marble. Village Chief Mr Vanxay Luangphath told *Vientiane Times* on Friday the image probably originates from the Khmer Empire, according to an old monk who lives in the village temple. “The local authorities may invite officials and archaeologists from central and provincial culture, information and tourism offices to examine the finds if further discoveries are made,” headed. Mr Vanxay said the Buddha image was being kept safe in the village temple for the time being. Local authorities said the final destination for the stone carving would probably be an official storeroom of some kind. The surprise find marks the first time in many years that there has been a significant archaeological discovery in Xaysomboun province. Some local officials believe there may be other objects dating from the Khmer Empire buried in Longxan district. Local authorities have expressed a wish to award a certificate to Mr Lae for alerting the authorities to the remarkable find. It is hoped the driver's actions inspire other people to hand over similar finds and respect the country's antiquities.

(*Vientiane Times* 07 March 2016)

UN chief calls for empowerment of women as “agents of change”

(By Somxay&Phoukhong)

UNITED NATIONS (Xinhua) -- UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in a message to mark International Women's Day on March 8, has called for the empowerment of women as “agents of change” to address pressing problems. In poor parts of the world today, women still risk death in the process of giving life and girls are attacked on their way to school, said Ban. “We can only address these problems by empowering women as agents of change,” he said while citing positive changes within the UN system. “When I arrived at the United Nations, there were no women leading our peace missions in the field. Now, nearly a quarter of all UN missions are headed by women - far from enough but still a vast improvement,” he added. Ban also pointed out that he has signed nearly 150 letters of appointment to women in positions as Assistant Secretary-General or Under-Secretary-General. While he remains outraged by the denial of rights to women and girls, Ban said he takes heart from the people everywhere who act on the secure knowledge that “women's empowerment leads to society's advancement.” UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-NGcuk, also called on the international community to “Step It Up for Gender Equality” in her message to mark the day. This year's celebration of International Women's Day is the first within the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Develop-

ment. The new Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals include a specific goal to achieve gender equality, said Mlambo-NGcuk. “To arrive at the future we want, we cannot leave anyone behind. We have to start with those who are the least regarded. These are largely women and girls, although in poor and troubled areas, they can also include boys and men,” she said. Echoing Ban's message, Mlambo-NGcuk noted that women and girls are critical to finding sustainable solutions to the challenges of poverty, inequality and the recovery of the communities hardest hit by conflicts, disasters and displacements. Moreover, women and girls are at the frontline of the outbreaks of threatening new epidemics, such as Zika virus disease or the impact of climate change, and at the same time are the bulwark to protect their families, work for peace, and ensure sustainable economic growth and social change, she said. So she reiterated the greater participation of women as one of the necessary conditions for an inclusive Agenda 2030. “Their leadership is insufficiently recognized but must emerge with greater participation in decision-making bodies,” she said. The 2016 theme for International Women's Day is “Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality”. The official UN commemoration will take place at the UN headquarters in New York City on March 8.

(Vientiane Times 07 March 2016)

Xiengkhuang residents get on-the-spot access to legal information

(By Times Reporters)

Residents of Xiengkhuang province now have more access to information regarding their rights, laws and court cases after the opening of an Information Kiosk at the provincial court last week. An official opening ceremony took place to celebrate and publicise the new information centre, according to the United Nations Development Project (UNDP). The event was attended by the Director of the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Section of the US Embassy in Vientiane, Ms Kimberley Bulkley, Cooperation Attaché from the EU Delegation in Laos Audrey Maillot, local officials and other invited guests. Citizens will also benefit from a fully functional Legal Aid Centre at the provincial Justice Department, featuring an office where material on citizens' rights and obligations is available, as well as a telephone hotline that opened in December. Since it opened, the centre has helped and provided advice to seven clients seeking legal aid, most commonly centered on family issues, domestic violence, human trafficking and illicit drugs. Staff at the centre regularly visit villages to inform communities about its existence and distribute information leaflets related to these most common problems. The project, funded by the EU, the United States and France, works with the Lao justice sector to help the country become a state fully governed by the rule of law, according to UNDP. "It was interesting to see how different legal services feed into each other to start adding up to a coherent

system that provides access to justice," Ms Bulkley said. "Through the project, access to information has improved on the provincial level noticeably, which is a stepping stone towards disseminating legal information in villages," Ms Maillot said. Amongst other challenges, the country of almost 6.8 million inhabitants has only less than 200 lawyers, making it challenging for citizens to file a case. The project is currently piloting legal service provision in Xiengkhuang province to create a model that can later be used across the country. The Information Kiosk is essentially the front door of a system of recorded court cases, where citizens can not only find all documents related to the case they filed, but also hear more about the next steps and get an update of the status and timing in their court case. In addition, people can gain an overview of how the system works through diagrams explaining court procedures. Clerks help people by pointing them to the right forms, and - should they decide to file a case - help them complete them. The Legal Aid Centre refers citizens to the court, police, village mediation units and other services, while the Information Kiosk is a formal inlet into the justice system. Article 6 of the latest amendment of the Lao Constitution obliges authorities to raise awareness on laws and available remedies to the population, making Xiengkhuang's efforts in disseminating legal information a timely response to this requirement.

(Vientiane Times 07 March 2016)

Hydropower experts mull industry's future

(By Times Reporters)

The Sixth International Conference and Exhibition on Water Resources and Hydropower Development in Asia, held in Vientiane last week, gathered experts in the field to discuss how hydropower could be developed in the most beneficial ways. The conference, which ran from March 1-3, discussed the experiences of more than 40 countries in the field of water resource and sustainable hydropower development and involved both private and government sectors. Topics tabled for discussion included social responsibility, environmental impacts, economic benefits, hydro plant development and management, as well as financial aspects of the industry. The conference attracted participants who were interested in hydropower construction in Laos, because of the lack of societal conflict and the strong cooperation of all sectors from local to central authorities. The success of hydropower development in Laos to date is attributed to the support of local populations, companies and the government, as well as international organisations and development partners. The building of dams in Laos has helped to improve living conditions in neighbouring communities, create jobs, and generate significant revenue for the government's budget for use in development projects. The Lao government is deeply committed to developing hydropower projects that meet the highest standards of economic, social and environmental sustainability. Every project must be a model of sustainability or it will not be built. Speaking

at the closing ceremony, Director General of the Department of Energy Business, Mr Xaypaseuth Phomsoupha said "Over the years, Laos has developed its hydropower resources with the goal of achieving nationwide electrification and helping to reduce carbon-bearing electricity generation in the region by making more electricity available to consumers across the country and those living in neighbouring countries to which we supply electricity." Given the multi-faceted benefits, mankind may develop hydropower resources for several purposes considered from a wider perspective than electricity generation alone, he added. Asia 2016 successfully gathered individuals, experts, professionals and administrators from around the world to share their experiences in hydropower development, said Mr Xaypaseuth. "Our local professionals and government officials have benefited from attending various sessions on technical, financial and legal aspects." He believed participants from other countries had learned about success stories in developing hydropower resources as presented at the conference. The conference was organised by Aqua-Media International, and was recognised as being beneficial to all those involved in the hydro, dams and water resources industries, including engineers, consultants, academics and governmental organisations. As well as the technical conference and exhibition, numerous social and networking events were organised as well as study tours.

(Vientiane Times 07 March 2016)

Govt vows to improve healthcare services for women

(By Times Reporters)

The government has reaffirmed its commitment to work closely with the agencies concerned to improve healthcare for women around the country, as Laos celebrates International Women's Day today. This was the main message of an address by the President of the Lao Women's Union, Dr Inlavanh-Keopbounphanh, at a meeting held yesterday to mark the 106th International Women's Day.



Dr Inlavanh-Keopbounphanh addresses the meeting.

Dr Inlavanh said the meeting also aimed to encourage women to better manage health issues for themselves and their children. The theme for Women's Day this year is "Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality". The United Nations' observance of the day will reflect on how to accelerate the 2030 Agenda, building momentum for the effective implementation of the new Sustainable Development Goals. It will equally focus on new commitments under UN Women's Step It Up initiative, and other existing commitments on gender equality, women's empowerment and women's human rights. The meeting in Vientiane encouraged women to work together in achieving Laos' socio-economic strategy plans, especially for poverty reduction. Participants learned about nutrition, cervical cancer, the effects of the

menopause, improving sanitation and the prevention of communicable diseases. Papers were delivered by ministry officials and UN agencies. "We hope women here will use what they learn to improve their quality of life and the daily living conditions of their families," Dr Inlavanh said. She told participants the Lao Women's Union planned to hold activities such as a trade fair, dancing, textile exhibition, and various contests, to celebrate Women's Day. "Each year on and around March 8, the world joins in celebrating Women's Day. This year marks 106 years of campaigning for change for the women of the world," she said. Dr Inlavanh also said the day recognised and honoured the progress made by women, especially remembering those who continued to suffer as victims of oppression. "This day is also about greater appreciation of the status and situation of women in Laos, and those in other developing nations," she added. UN agencies are committed to supporting programmes that contribute to achieving targets centred on women's development, with the United Nations Development Fund for Women playing a special role in keeping the focus on these targets. UNICEF globally addresses gender equality in all of its programming including in Laos. Today the country celebrates UNICEF partnerships with the Lao government in achieving great strides in the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Women and girls in many countries continue to suffer the majority of the burdens caused by difficult living conditions, including the task of collecting water. More than 300 women from line ministries, the public sector and NGOs attended yesterday's meeting.

(Vientiane Times 08 March 2016)

Road upgrade on the cards as northern travellers suffer

(By Times Reporters)

While bus and minivan passengers put up with a rough ride on the potholed Road No.13 North to Vangvieng district in Vientiane province, officials are considering its upgrade.



A section of Road No. 13 North on the way to Vangvieng district, Vientiane province.

An official from the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, who asked not to be named, told *Vientiane Times* on Monday parts of Road No. 13 North through Vientiane province are breaking up following damage during last year's rainy season but there were plans afoot to remedy the situation. "We have a plan to alter parts of Road 13 North and Road 13 South to make them into two- and four-lane highways starting from Vientiane," he said. Right now, a study on toll-way development has finished and the ministry is assessing the pros and cons of upgrading the arterial highway to cater for the increasing traffic volume. Road 13 North may be rebuilt from the Sikeut junction in

Vientiane to the bus station in Vangvieng district, a distance of 142 kilometres. Under consideration is a plan to make 57km of the road, running from the Sikeut junction to Phonhong district in Vientiane province, into a four-lane highway, followed by an 85km two-lane stretch from there to Vangvieng, all of which would be asphalted. On Road 13 South, the starting point is identified as the Dongdok intersection in Vientiane with redevelopment all the way to Sivilay village in Borikhamxay province, a total length of 141km. Meanwhile, a 100-km section between the Phoupha area in Phonhong district and Kasy district in Vientiane province is proving quite problematic for motorists. The poor condition of the road is causing distress to travellers, who are jolted unpleasantly as they pass over the many bumps. Every year sections of various roads and bridges around the country are damaged by floods and landslides as a result of torrential rain. Roads also rapidly deteriorate due to the frequent passage of heavy trucks carrying timber, cement, rocks and other loads. According to the Vientiane provincial Public Works and Transport Department, the current problem has occurred because of the age of the road. It was also built to withstand only loads of 9 tonnes per axle, but many trucks carry heavier loads.

(*Vientiane Times* 08 March 2016)

Ministry embarks on nutrition programme

(By Times Reporters)

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is gearing up to implement four priority measures to support a practical plan for 2016-2020 and a national strategy on nutrition until 2025, with a focus on agriculture. Deputy Head of the ministry's Planning Division, Ms Phimmason Xaymontry, told a multi-sectoral nutrition workshop recently that officials were working hard to implement these measures. The first objective is to increase the production of food that has a high nutritional value. This includes garden vegetables, medicinal plants, seeds that provide oil, mushrooms and other forest foods. The necessary equipment and infrastructure will be provided, such as small-scale irrigation systems, along with services to advise on appropriate farming methods. The second

measure requires the ministry to promote the production of animal meat for family consumption. This includes poultry, fish and other aquatic creatures. The provision of basic infrastructure and the necessary equipment, including small-scale irrigation systems and agricultural services, are again important for the success of this initiative. The third measure will require support for post-harvest production. This includes the use of machinery to dry crops so they can be stored and provide a source of nutrition for families year-round. The last objective will see the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry promote activities that earn an income. These include the sale of crops and forest products such as mushrooms and medicinal plants, through sustainable processes.

(Vientiane Times 08 March 2016)

EU trade experts advise on AEC development

(By Times Reporters)



Delegates from Asean member countries and the European Union link hands at the 14th AEM-EU Trade Commissioner Consultation last week in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

The EU-Asean Business Council (EU-ABC) last week presented recommendations aimed at speeding up the Asean Economic Community (AEC) and ensuring that its objectives are felt more readily by all. The recommendations were made at the 14th Asean Economic Ministers (AEM)-EU Trade Commissioner Consultation, held in Chiang

Mai, Thailand. The EU-ABC also requested more meaningful and dynamic consultation with the private sector to help advance the Asean Economic Community. Commenting on the EU-ABC's presentation to the Asean Economic Ministers, the Council's Chairman Francois Guibert said Asean is a hugely important region for European business. The European Union is still the largest source of foreign direct investment in Asean, providing more in 2014 than the US and Japan combined, and is also Asean's second largest trading partner. 2015 was an important year for the region leading to the inauguration of the Asean Economic Community, and the EU-ABC is a strong supporter of this crucial project for the region. The year 2016 takes on special importance as the advances made in the AEC need to be bedded in and then deepened further. "Today we presented a number of short term recommendations, with a

focus on trade facilitation, financial services and investment issues, that we believe could make a tangible difference to the Asean region and help advance the achievement of the goals set out in the AEC Blueprint 2025,” MrGuibertsaid.Executive Director of the EU-ABC Mr Chris Humphrey said “We have always said that the AEC is a work in progress, and it is a project that we at the EU-ABC are delighted to support and assist with. Much work lies ahead if the full benefits of the AEC are to be realised throughout the region.”“For the benefit of everyone in Asean we hope to see rapid progress on the removal of Non-Tariff Barriers to trade in Asean, as called for under the original AEC Blueprint, as well as measures that can spread the benefits of the AEC to all corners

of Asean such as increased support for SMEs and the broadening and deepening of the integration of financial services in Asean, enhancement in information and communication technology, protection of intellectual property, and improvement in the trade in goods and services,” he added.“We have therefore today presented the Asean Economic Ministers with a list of short-term recommendations which we believe will help advance the AEC agenda.”“These recommendations have been designed so that they could be achievable in a relatively short space of time and the benefits of them could be readily felt by everyone in the region,” he added.“We stand ready to help Asean in any way possible with the work ahead,” Mr Humphrey said.

(Vientiane Times 08 March 2016)

Women promoted to higher positions in govt

(By Times Reporters)

More women have been employed and promoted to higher posts within the Party and government, according to the latest survey carried out by the Lao Women's Union.



Some of the more self-reliant women in Laos are now paddling their own canoe.

The Union stated that Lao women represent 43 percent of the total number of 150,000 civil servants who now serve in various government sectors in Vientiane and the provinces. In addition, several women have been appointed as ministers, deputy ministers and to other important government positions. The

Union said Lao women comprise about 10 percent of provincial Party committee members and 12 percent of district Party committees. In ministry departments, women represent about 19 percent of the total figure while female members of the National Assembly's Seventh Legislature make up 25 percent of the total. The National Election Committee hopes that more women will be elected to the National Assembly in the March 20 election. The 10th Party Congress which took place in January resulted in the election of 10 women to the 69-member Party Central Committee with three women included among the eight alternative Party Central Committee members. One woman has become a Party Politburo Member. Former Vice President of the Lao Women's Union, MsKhamchanhPhomsengsavanh, commented that women are playing an increasing role in Laos, not only in government but also in business. “Many women have now obtained higher education and have been promoted to higher ranks in the

government. Many of them have become business leaders,” MsKhamchanhsaid. Some Lao women run businesses in other countries, including Myanmar. Today's women don't necessarily rely on their male partner for an income because they have higher education and can find jobs and earn money themselves. But MsKhamchanh, who served the Lao Women's Union for many years, said the percentage of women being promoted to leadership roles at the village level was still small. Maternal mortality rates are still high in Laos, while some communities are reluctant to encourage girls to further their studies. She called for Lao women to pursue a higher education and support their daughters' efforts to do so, so that many

more women can be promoted to higher ranks in government and make a greater contribution to national development. According to the latest Lao Population and Housing Census, the population has now climbed to over 6.49 million people, including 3,237,600 women. The government's policies promote gender equality and the role of women in society. The government is aware that men cannot solve all the problems and women need to be included in policy debates. One woman in Vientiane said that if women are given the same opportunities, they can be the equal of men. The government has called for society to give opportunities to Lao women in doing important tasks to further national development.

(Vientiane Times 09 March 2016)

Ancient bronze Buddha images found in Khammuan

(By Times Reporters)

Five bronze Buddha images and some artefacts, estimated to be 500 years old or more, have been found in Pakuanyuak Cave near Sanak village in Hinboun district, Khammuan province. A local resident, Mr Hong, discovered the images and artefacts in the cave which is 2 kilometres from his home. Local authorities have taken possession of the five Buddha statuettes and other items for safe-keeping in the village. The Buddha images ranged in size from 16cm to 44cm while the other items were 10cm to 20cm in size, according to an unofficial report from the provincial Information, Culture and Information Department. In an interview with *Vientiane Times* yesterday, the department's Deputy Director Mr Bounthavy Sisombath said the find was significant for the local community as it could help attract visitors to the area. Mr Bounthavy said the department had sent officials to work with local authorities

to examine the images and to see if further discoveries had been made, saying “We will have clearer information within the week after we've examined the artefacts and identified other items of potential interest in the same area.” The artefacts were found in an old cave known to be a former hiding place for Buddha images and other cultural relics during foreign invasions. The surprise find of the bronze Buddhas marks the first time for many years there has been a significant archaeological discovery in Hinboun district. Some officials believe there may be other objects buried in the cave. The information, culture and tourism authorities have expressed a wish to reward Mr Hong for alerting officials to the remarkable find. It is hoped his actions set a good example for other citizens when it comes to respecting the country's antiquities.

(Vientiane Times 09 March 2016)

Govt commits to expanding family planning access

By PhetphoxaySengpaseuth

The government will step up efforts to ensure that more women and girls have access to modern contraceptive methods, aiming to significantly improve reproductive health in Laos by 2020. The government this year committed to the Family Planning 2020 movement and is dedicated to increasing the use of modern contraceptive methods by Lao women and girls from the current 42 percent to 65 percent by the year 2020. Under the programme, Laos is committed to improving the lives of women through increased access to family planning, Deputy Minister of Health Associate Prof. Dr Som Ock Kingsada told a workshop in Vientiane yesterday. Describing the objectives of the Family Planning 2020 movement and Laos' commitment to support the work of family planning, Dr Som Ock said the government will review its policy on reproductive health and improving access to health services by women and girls, because females in target regions did not receive adequate health information. This was particularly true among young women, women with no education, and the poorest women. One in five women still don't have access to services and the adolescent birth rate is the highest in this region, with 94 out of 1,000 girls aged 15-19 giving birth. Dr Som Ock said they would expand family planning services and encourage the use of modern contraceptive methods by women and girls by providing them at district and village dispensaries. Health officials will provide more information on reproductive health and health services for women and girls, including poor women in remote areas of every province. Dr Som Ock said one reason for the lack of access to health services was that the ministry did not

have enough doctors and nurses in rural dispensaries. The government would increase the number of health staff in dispensaries so that more women could get information on modern family planning methods, and would encourage their use on a comprehensive basis, he added. Also speaking at the workshop, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Representative Ms Frederika Meijer said access to safe, voluntary family planning was a human right. Family planning was central to gender equality and women's empowerment, and was a key factor in reducing poverty, she added. The UNFPA works to support family planning by ensuring a steady, reliable supply of quality contraceptives; strengthening national health systems; advocating for policies supportive of family planning; and gathering data to support this work. Ms Meijer said family planning was about choice for girls, women and couples, including the choice of whether to have children or not, with whom, when, and how many. This choice was reaffirmed during the 20 year review of the commitments of the International Conference on Population and Development as well as in the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals. Both of these emphasise broadening contraceptive choice, improving the quality of care, and ensuring reproductive rights. Laos has made great progress in the area of family planning. The National Birth Spacing Policy, in use since 1995, declares that contraceptives will be provided free to everyone who needs them. The National Reproductive Health Policy, in effect since 2005, pledges to improve the availability and sustainability of quality family planning services, Ms Meijer said.

(Vientiane Times 10 March 2016)

Lao heritage sites awarded Mekong tourism prize

(By SouknilundonSouthivongnorath)

Laos' world heritage sites of LuangPrabang and Vat PhouChampassak have won the Mekong Tourism Award 2015, with the accolade made public in Tokyo, Japan, on March 8. Personal Relations officer for the Asean-Japan Centre, Ms Junko Nukiyama, told *Vientiane Times* by telephone yesterday that the Centre and members of a judging committee selected five tour products at destinations in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam (known collectively as CLMV) as winners of the Mekong Tourism Award 2015.



Vat PhouChampassak was one of the Lao sites chosen by Japanese tour agencies as the winner of the Unique Tour award under the Mekong Tourism Award 2015. (File photo)

The New Destination award went to Myanmar, Ecotourism and Unique Tour awards were won by Laos, the Exchange Programme award went to Cambodia, and the Jury's Special award was given to Vietnam. LuangPrabang was cited for its World Heritage Site in the provincial capital and a Khmu village that is encouraging ecotourism, while Champassak was highlighted for the Vat Phou cruise and The River Resort. The Mekong Tourism Award is an initiative of the Asean-Japan Centre and is

supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, the Japan Tourism Agency, the Japan Association of Travel Agents, and the Overseas Tour Operators Association of Japan. The main objective of the award is to encourage the Japanese travel industry to identify unique and diversified quality tour products in the CLMV bloc and to entice outbound travellers from Japan to visit these destinations. Ms Nukiyama said the ceremony in Tokyo to announce the awards was attended by travel agents including land operators and airline companies associated with the selected tour products. Myanmar was given the New Destination Award for combining visits to destinations, exemplified by tours to the Kakku Pagodas and magnificent views seen at sunset at Bagan. Cambodia won the Exchange Programme Award for teaching physical education to elementary school pupils and bringing tour participants to teach sports to pupils at schools in remote areas in Siem Reap. The programme provides two-way interaction among tour participants and school pupils and ideally promotes a win-win relationship. Vietnam was the Jury's Special award for a tour that takes customers to six World Heritage Sites. It introduces the PhongNha-Ke Bang National Park, a new destination in recently popular central Vietnam, and provides an opportunity for customers to experience a variety of local cuisines and beers from different regions. Tourism is flourishing in Laos and the country saw 4.3 million international tourist arrivals last year, up 4.88 percent from 4.1 million visitors in 2014.

(Vientiane Times 10 March 2016)